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CHURCHMEN DECRY FCC RULE CHANGE

NEW YORK -- The recent move by the Federal Communication Commission in freeing radio stations from public service program requirements marks a change in philosophy that brought a quick, negative reaction from religious communication experts.

The federal agency decided that it no longer needed to maintain tight regulation of the airwaves because rapid expansion and increasing competition in the radio marketplace would ensure wide diversity of programming.

The commissioners lifted a rule which had required that AM stations devote 8 percent and FM stations 6 percent of their broadcast time to public affairs, news and other information programming.

Under the Communication Act of 1934, the air waves were regarded as a public resource and the broadcaster as a trustee charged with guarding the public's access to that resource.

When the change was announced, the Rev. Richard J. Anderson, Communication Executive of the Episcopal Church Center, was quick to highlight the seeming change in philosophy. '61

"I am disappointed that the requirement has been dropped, since it served to remind broadcasters that the airwaves are public property and of their obligation to render service to public interest groups and concerns of wide variety. If broadcasters hold this concern, as many say they do, then the requirement worked no hardship on them and should have been no problem to them," he said.

Anderson pledged to "continue to seek access to broadcast media with the hope that what we have to offer will be seen by broadcasters as a contribution to society and in keeping with high production standards. We will continue to work with the broadcast industry under the new legislation and trust we will have their cooperation and interest."

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An even more pessimistic view was expressed by Theodore Baehr, executive director of the Episcopal Radio-TV Foundation. Baehr, a lawyer and communication expert, has written and spoken against the proposed change for many months.

"Eliminating all ascertainment requirements will destroy public interest programming," he said. "Besides main line religion programs, this change will mean the end of local news, local agricultural reports, local political broadcasts, minority, public health, educational, cultural, consumer and all other types of programs that are not good income producers in favor of a steady diet of commercials, commercial programming and paid programming."

He predicted that sports and entertainment would dominate broadcasting and that small stations would move quickly to automated systems using "canned," prepackaged national shows, thereby eliminating existing local jobs, limiting minority entry and boosting profits. "There will be no requirement to plow any of those profits back into serving the public interest, a repellant thought in terms of Christian values and in terms of the Bill of Rights," he concluded.

There are already moves afoot to overturn the FCC action. The U.S. Circuit Court has been asked to review the decision and communication experts are studying the text of the regulations to test the possibility of other court action.

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